The UNFPA Somalia Country Office, in collaboration with UNICEF, has been employing a bottom-up approach, engaging religious leaders and civil society organizations about the harmful practice of FGM. The Fund has been mobilizing religious leaders in all three zones to help accelerate abandonment of FGM and to influence authorities to take concrete actions to end the practice.

UNFPA and the former Ministry of Women, Family and Social Affairs have organized a workshop with prominent religious leaders (Imams and Sheikhs) in Puntland. After a thorough review of the Qur’an and Ahadith, the religious leaders unanimously agreed in delinking the practice of FGM from Islamic religion. This contributed and eventually led to the declaration of the ‘Fatwa’ against the practice of FGM.

UNFPA, together with UNICEF, has been facilitating exposure visits of religious leaders and Ministry representatives from Puntland to Sudan, and those from Somaliland to Djibouti, to exchange information and experiences. The cross fertilization and learning experiences have motivated the Somali participants to take concrete steps to halt the practice, including formulation of the ‘Fatwa’ against FGM in Puntland. The religious ruling has propelled a strong push towards zero tolerance to FGM, which has been incorporated into the Puntland policy framework and enactment of a law banning all types of FGM.
Strategies

Various strategies have been adopted in engaging and mobilizing Somali religious leaders in all three regions to address issues relating to the practice of FGM, particularly in light of the widespread perception among their followers that it is a religious obligation.

Workshops, seminars and training for religious leaders have been conducted to raise their awareness, educate and inform them on the negative and harmful effects of FGM on the health and well-being of women and girls. Other topics have also been included, such as reproductive health, FPA/AIDS and child and women’s rights.

Meetings and dialogue among clerics have been convened to enable them to exchange views and discuss prominently among themselves Islamic teachings that relate to FGM and the impact of the practice on their followers, especially on women and girls.

The views and position of highly respected Islamic scholars in and outside Somalia, specifically in delineating FGM from Islam have been elected and widely published through mass media. As the most influential and trusted authority in terms of religious guidance, their perspectives, pronouncements and endorsement are considered vital in accelerating and eventually ending the practice.

In Puntland, a series of regional dialogues was convened that brought together more than 350 Sheikhs to deliberate and come to a consensus on a religious ruling outlawing all forms of FGM. In addition to the discussions, the religious leaders held a substantive dialogue focusing on gender-based violence prevention, including halting the practice of FGM in the region. They issued a message that clearly conveyed their stance and commitment to halt the practice.

In November 2013, Puntland Islamic scholars declared a ‘Fatwa’ calling for a “complete stopping” of all types of FGM, including ‘Jinni,’ the religious leaders maintained that their stance conforms to the practice in Islam with the guidance from Qur’an and the authentic tradition of the Prophet (PBUH).” They urged “all Somalis, particularly those living in the Puntland region, for the sake of Allah, [to] abandon harmful practices and any other acts outside the guidance of Islamic religious.”

The leader of over 500 traditional Chieftains (Sultans) in Puntland, Garabed Ali Abdi, underscored that the ‘Fatwa’ is a key milestone for accelerating FGM abandonment and called for a wide and massive awareness campaign to ensure that all community members in the region are fully aware of it.

Four months after the ‘Fatwa’ against the practice of FGM was issued, the President of Puntland enacted a new law banning FGM in March 2014. The Government policy states that it aims for a total abandonment of FGM practices through effective abandonment strategies and measures for sustainable behavioral change both at the family level and society at large. These include working with religious leaders and health professionals, sensitizing the community, using the media, providing access to quality reproductive health services and generation of reliable FGM data.

UNFPA organized a series of training programmes, targeting nearly 700 religious leaders in Puntland and Somaliland, to strengthen their capacity as actors of change to conduct effective dialogues with individuals and communities on issues relating to FGM. The trained religious leaders have formed a Religious Leaders’ Network of 240 committed Sheikhs in Puntland and Somaliland. The Network has become an engine of social mobilization for the wider community in the FGM abandonment campaign. It is estimated that some 50,000 community members have increased their understanding of the harmful effects of FGM and of the need to abandon the practice, either at Fajr prayer or through formal and informal sessions conducted by these religious leaders.

There has been a steadily increasing number of Somali religious leaders who have made public declarations of abandoning FGM from religion, nearly tripling from 677 in 2011 to 2,498 in 2013 (see Chart below). An explicit public affirmation by religious figures has proven to be an essential element in raising awareness of the practice, especially in prac- ticing communities where it is imperative to clearly disenchant FGM from religious considerations to create an enabling environment for behavioral change.

Progress and results

In November 2013, Puntland Islamic scholars declared a ‘Fatwa’ calling for a “complete stopping” of all types of FGM, including ‘Jinni.’ The religious leaders maintained that their stance conforms to the practice in Islam with the guidance from Qur’an and the authentic tradition of the Prophet (PBUH).” They urged “all Somalis, particularly those living in the Puntland region, for the sake of Allah, [to] abandon harmful practices and any other acts outside the guidance of Islamic religious.”

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Lessons learned and good practice

Religious leaders play an important and often a decisive role in furthering the campaign to accelerate the abandonment of FGM. As spiritual guides and counselors, the views and position of Islamic clerics on the long-held social and cultural consensus of FGM among Somali society is critical. To this end, UNFPA has been working with Islamic clerics, including highly respected and authoritative scholars, in a powerful means of persuasion and a compelling testimony that change and a shift in social norms is possible.

Many religious leaders are embracing an expanded role in their communities as a re- sult of their support for the campaigns against FGM. They serve as effective anti-FGM advocates educating community members not only on the non-religious ground of the practice but its harmful effects on women and girls. To reach a broader audience, religious advocates are tapping media channels, especially the radio, which continues to be a powerful tool of communication, especially in remote and nomadic communities to connect awareness belief that FGM is a religious obligation, among other myths and misconceptions.

Conducting dialogue, debates and consensus building meetings exclusively among re- ligious leaders is important, but reliance on media alone is not enough that FGM should stop in all its forms. While there is universal agreement that the drastic and severe forms of “Pharaonic” circumcision should be stopped, some maintain that the mitre type, “Sun- na,” is acceptable and should continue to be performed on girls. Unitiing the voices of Somali religious leaders in all regions to support zero tolerance to all forms of FGM, including FGM variants, is a critical step.

Capitalizing on the crucial role of religious leaders, it is vital to build a critical mass by training a new generation of Somali clerics to sustain efforts and accelerate FGM aban- donment. The training should cover all aspects of the practice, including reproductive and sexual health, culture and tradition, human rights, gender and women’s empowerment, behavioral change and the Islamic perspective on the practice.

The proclamation of a ‘Fatwa’ by eminent religious leaders followed by a Government policy declaring FGM an illegal practice is a good example and model for the other Somali regions, particularly Somaliland, where a draft decree prohibiting FGM is awaiting endorsement from local religious leaders.

While the growing number of Somali religious leaders has become a symbolic and comp- elling force in creating awareness, building momentum and changing behavior among in Puntland, con- sidered and collective efforts of other key stakeholders, including authorities, traditional and community leaders, youth, nongovernmental organizations, NGOs and the media are impor- tant to oblige the practice of FGM.

Female genital mutilation (FGM) is a widespread and deeply entrenched social custom that has been practiced in Somalia for many centuries. Nearly 97 per cent of Somali- girls aged 15-19 had undergone the procedure, many of whom have been subjected to the most severe forms of FGM. Despite the negative social health consequences and efforts to abandon the practice, it persisted due to a common belief that it is a religious ob- ligation, among other notions.

Many Somali believe that seeking the long-held tradition “will unleash the anger of God on them” and that women who are unchaste are “not pious and spiritual” and cannot pray. They are seen as “uprooted Muslims who are disdained to their traditions and culture.”

In Somalia, as in many other countries where the influence of Islam is pervasive, the role of religious leaders, particularly their views and position on FGM, is critical in construc- ting individual, families and communities to halt the practice. They are pivotal agents of change who can bolster and accelerate abandonment of the harmful practice.

Religious leaders and scholars, however, are divided on their interpretation of the Qur’an and other Islamic teachings on how best to address the practice of FGM. There are three, those, like the religious leaders in Puntland, who advocate for the abandonment of all types of FGM. On the other hand, there is a group who believe that the ‘Jinni’ type of circum- cision on girls in an Islamic tradition and should not be abandoned. Those who assert for total abandonment maintain that the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was particularly concerned about the good treatment of women, and that he admonished Muslims not to cause damage to themselves or others, and that even the ‘Jinni’ type of FGM is not invalid. It is a religious law, practice and a result of a natural process that “Mubah” ( tolerant) in Islam and falls under the category of disliked (‘Maj getAllah, “wrong”).”

Cognizant of the crucial role of religious leaders in aboliishing the practice of FGM, UNFPA, in partnership with UNICEF, has been working with Islamic scholars and religious leaders across Africa, including Somalia. Engaging one of the most influential groups in Puntland – the Somali Sheiks and Imams – has not only led to public anti-FGM declara-
Accelerating the Abandonment of Female Genital Mutilation in Somalia

Good Practice on FGM abandonment in Somalia

The UNFPA Somalia Country Office has been closely working with and providing support to Youth Peer Networks in South Central, Puntland and Somaliland, through technical and financial assistance, to raise awareness about the harmful practice of FGM and to mobilize youth for its total abandonment.

The peer-to-peer approach of the Network has been effective, especially since young people have their own way of communicating and engaging with each other. Furthermore, since UNFPA has been collaborating with the Somali authorities, the Fund has been serving as a bridge between the youth networks and the various Ministries working on youth and development.

UNFPA has been facilitating and fostering close cooperation between the authorities and youth networks, including ensuring that the voices and views of Somali youth are heard, inform policy-making and reflected in government plans and programmes. Together, they have joined hands towards accelerating the total abandonment of all forms of FGM in Somalia.

Acknowledgments and Further Information

This case study was produced in collaboration with UNFPA’s Gender, Human Rights and Culture Branch, and the Somalia Country Office with input from the following experts and consultants: Yohannes Dogi, Rene Desiderio (Fordham University Institute of International Humanitarian Affairs) and UNFPA partners in the field. For more information about this practice, please contact Pilirani Sama-Banda (sama-banda@unfpa.org).

UNFPA Support and Partners

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Somali youth raising awareness against FGM

Photo: UNFPA Somalia/Ruth Solomon

Good Practice on FGM abandonment in Somalia
Somali youth taps social media, harnesses technology and other means to curtail and eliminate FGM

Somalia has the highest prevalence rate of female genital mutilation (FGM) in the world. Nearly 97 per cent of girls aged 15-19 had undergone the procedure, many of whom have been subjected to the most severe forms of FGM in a deeply rooted cultural practice, which was traditionally performed in adolescence as initiation into womanhood. However, unlike other practicing communities in Africa, FGM in Somalia is not longer considered a religious rite of passage. The majority of FGM is performed on girls as young as five and six years of age, often within the privacy of their homes. The belief is widely held that it is necessary and a prerequisite for marriage, among other things.

FGM is practiced among different socio-economic groups, urban, rural and nomadic settlements. It is a harmful practice with lifelong adverse health consequences that jeopardize the well being of Somali girls and women and infringe upon their fundamental human rights.

Building on initiatives that have demonstrated success in reducing the prevalence of FGM, UNFPA in partnership with UNICEF has focused on accelerating its abandonment across Africa, including Somalia. Among other initiatives, community engagement through education and dialogue involving various groups, including young men and women, and the local community, has been the primary tool for the practice of cutting girls and young women among other issues. The young people convey their messages through drama, comedy, poems and songs that resonate with various members of the local community.

Youth organizations have continued to make media campaigns through print publications, radio, television and billboard messages that have stimulated public interest and raised awareness on the human rights and reproductive health aspects of FGM, including the irreversible lifelong health risks faced by women and girls, among other adverse consequences.

Young men and women who have made a decisive decision to abandon the practice have expressed their commitment through an explicit public declaration. The open repudiation of the practice has taken the form of a joint pledge in a large public gathering or individual members who stand up and make a public announcement, such as male youth who declared that they will not marry women who have been cut.

Progress and results

Youth organizations and networks, led and coordinated by Y-PEER Network, in Puntland, Somaliland and South Central Somalia have been actively involved in various initiatives to accelerate the abandonment of FGM.

Youth organizations have tapped social media to advocate for FGM abandonment. Mobile phone technology and other means to curtail and eliminate the practice of FGM. In Puntland, the Y-PEER Network on FGM Abandonment organized a National Youth Conference where over 350 adolescents signed a public declaration abandoning the harmful practice. In Somali, 39 young men said “No” to FGM and publicly pledged that they will not marry girls that were circumcised during the commemoration of the International Day of Zero Tolerance to FGM.

Lessons learned and good practice

As future parents and embroiled in the hopes of the nation, young Somali men and women play an important and catalytic role in bringing about change, accelerating abandonment and eventually abolishing FGM. When young people acknowledge and embrace basic human rights, they can help bring about change by individually and collectively affirm their commitment to support abandonment of FGM and become a powerful force for social transformation and national development.

Now social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, have provided rich opportunities for interaction, discussion and debate and have been especially effective in addressing and educating the public on the harms of FGM.

Mobile phone technology is a powerful, youth-friendly and handy tool that stores information and connects young people to their friends and peers. Messages like other practices in Africa, FGM in Somalia is no longer considered a religious rite of passage. The majority of FGM is performed on girls as young as five and six years of age, often within the privacy of their homes. The belief is widely held that it is necessary and a prerequisite for marriage, among other things.

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Media campaigns on FGM abandonment through television and radio, such as talk shows, soap operas, phone-in in the local language include “There is no changing Allah’s creation” and “I choose my bride based on love and integrity.” The goal is to reach as many people as possible from all walks of life, including especially young men.

Anti-FGM clubs have been formed in schools and universities throughout the region, including six new ones in Hargeisa, Gollis, Alpha, Adamas, New Generation and the University of Hargeisa. The club serves as a platform for in-school youth can exchange views and ideas about FGM, especially in impact on their lives. Clubs members not only raise awareness in their communities but also encourage for FGM abandonment to their schoolmates and those outside of school.

Even when many community members decide to abandon FGM, a successful model re-quires that they express their commitment through an explicit public declaration. It is a powerful means of persuasion and a key step in the process of real and sustained change.

The construction of anti-FGM youth clubs in schools brings together like-minded students who have been adopting the youth-led agenda for change. The clubs serve as a platform to promote and educate others on the harms and gender-based violence of the practice. The number of youth reached through the anti-FGM school and university clubs has been growing from just over 5,000 in 2011 to 6,000 in 2013 (see chart below).

A growing number of Somali youth, including young men, have been publicly renouncing the practice of FGM. In Puntland, the Youth Network on FGM abandonment organized a National Youth Conference where over 350 adolescents signed a public declaration abandoning the harmful practice. In Somaliland, 50 young men and “No” to FGM and publicly pledged that they will not marry girls that were circumcised during the commemoration of the International Day of Zero Tolerance to FGM.
Good Practice on FGM abandonment in Somalia

Accelerating the Abandonment of Female Genital Mutilation in Somalia

UNFPA Support and Partners

With a strong belief that maternal mortality cannot be reduced without addressing various problems that Somali women are facing, and also given the fact that FGM often results in severe complications during childbirth, UNFPA has been seizing every opportunity to integrate FGM into reproductive health policies, programs and plans.

UNFPA Somalia Country Office has been providing technical support to the Ministries of Health since the year in the integrations of prevention and care of FGM into reproductive health services in Puntland, Somaliland and South Central.

The incorporation of FGM issues into the training curriculum of midwives and nurses has the effect of saturating the future workforce with the knowledge and skills to address FGM throughout their practice.

Nine clinics (4 in Puntland and 5 in Somaliland) have integrated FGM prevention education in the antenatal care, neonatal care and immunization services.

UNFPA has provided financial and technical support to the Ministries of Health in Puntland, South Central and Somaliland to conduct training for health care providers in the prevention and management of FGM complications. Trained health care providers have become active advocates for ending FGM, raising awareness on the negative health consequences of the practice, among others.

Together with the Ministries of Health in Puntland and Somaliland, UNFPA is playing a pivotal role in coordinating the field-level Reproductive Health Working Groups and FGM Task Forces to place FGM on the regional agenda. Furthermore, UNFPA is closely working with the Goodwill Ambassadors of the Campaign on Acceleration of Reduction of Maternal Mortality in Africa for high-level advocacy efforts, highlighting the linkage of maternal health and gender and sexual reproductive health and rights and denouncing all types of FGM.

The strategic approach of various stakeholders, including technical support from UNFPA, has been effective and instrumental in the formulation of the Anti-Medicalization of FGM Strategic Plan (2014-2018) in Puntland. In particular, the evidence-based benchmarks produced by UNFPA proved vital for the strategy.

Acknowledgments and Further Information

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Empowered health worker discussing the issues of FGM with Somali mothers

Photo: UNFPA Somalia/Ruth Solomon
Female genital mutilation (FGM) is a devastating and harmful practice, affecting nearly 50% of Somali girls aged 5-15. Many have been subjected to the most severe form. The practice has detrimental short and long-term impacts on the lives of women and girls, especially on reproductive health, maternal and neonatal outcomes.

UNFPA, in collaboration with Ministries of Health and other partners, has been providing technical assistance to promote the abandonment of FGM and provide health care to women and girls who have undergone the practice. It is also helping to strengthen the legal framework to ban medicalization of FGM. Both in Somaliland and Puntland, anti-medicalization strategies are in place, which serve as a legal basis for prohibiting this harmful practice. The number of health care providers trained in the management of immediate and long-term complications through training, seminars and workshops is vital. Training sessions include theoretical and practical aspects of managing antenatal care, delivery and postpartum period, including counselling, as part of an improved maternal health care. In order to maintain the capacity strengthening of health care providers on FGM, the prevention and management of the health complications of FGM has been integrated into the curriculum of training and midwifery students. The integrated content is intended to equip students and the upcoming health workforce with information about FGM, including health consequences and influences on reproductive health in particular, as well as the cultural traditions that underlie it. It also includes topics focusing on the ethical, legal and human rights implications of the practice.

Such capacity building of health care professionals is critical for addressing the issue of medicalization of FGM. In this respect, UNFPA is working together with its partners to strengthen health care providers’ capacity to prevent FGM and the medicalization of FGM. Both in Somaliland and Puntland, anti-medicalization strategies are in place, which serve as a legal basis for prohibiting health workers from engaging in such practices as well as empowering them to prevent FGM and manage complications. Health care professionals are respected and listened to by individuals, families and communities and therefore play a major role in the abandonment of FGM, particularly in counselling and promoting education against the practice. As advocates and behaviour change agents, nurses, midwives and other health care providers support individuals and families to cope with problems resulting from FGM and assist them in the process of change. They play an important role in community outreach, such as through school programmes and public health education programme. In collaboration with other stakeholders, they lobby influential people in all relevant forums, such as professional organizations or political gatherings, on how to develop policies, laws and become actively involved in efforts to accelerate change and abandon the practice.

Strategies

- Interrelated strategies have been employed to prevent the harmful practice of FGM and care for Somali girls and women who suffer from its detrimental health consequences. These include strengthening local capacity to improve the quality of reproductive health service delivery systems to address FGM complications and sustain the advances made in halting the practice.

- Building the capacity of Somali health care professionals on the prevention of FGM and the management of immediate and long-term complications through training, seminars and workshops is vital. Training sessions include theoretical and practical aspects of managing antenatal care, delivery and postpartum period, including counselling, as part of an improved maternal health care. In order to maintain the capacity strengthening of health care providers on FGM, the prevention and management of the health complications of FGM has been integrated into the curriculum of training and midwifery students. The integrated content is intended to equip students and the upcoming health workforce with information about FGM, including health consequences and influences on reproductive health in particular, as well as the cultural traditions that underlie it. It also includes topics focusing on the ethical, legal and human rights implications of the practice.

Integration of prevention and care of FGM into reproductive health services in Somalia

As frontline health workers, midwives have unique knowledge about the practices and the pooling of resources to accelerate cross-sector efforts in the total abandonment of FGM and the medicalization of the practice.

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